

Convocation delegates return to Baltimore energized for missionary discipleship

Several delegates to a historic July 1-4 gathering of nearly 3,500 Catholic leaders from across the country said they returned to the Archdiocese of Baltimore with a renewed commitment to helping people of every background develop a deeper relationship with Christ.

Held in Orlando, Fla., the “Convocation of Catholic Leaders: The Joy of the Gospel in America,” was a massive effort by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to put into action Pope Francis’ 2013 apostolic exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel.”

The document calls on all Christians to become “missionary disciples” who share their love for Christ in a positive way with those around them and with those on what the pope called the “peripheries.”

“The event was extraordinary,” said Archbishop William E. Lori, who led the Archdiocese of Baltimore’s 22-member delegation that also included Auxiliary Bishops Adam J. Parker and Mark E. Brennan, along with Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop emeritus. “It was really unprecedented.”

The archbishop called the gathering “a moment of grace” when leaders of the church in the United States “really grappled with, unpacked and reflected” on the pope’s exhortation.

“We were trying to figure out collectively not only what it means,” he said, “but how to live it and how to put it into practice.”

Two homilies during the convocation specifically quoted the pope’s admonition in “The Joy of the Gospel” that Catholics shouldn’t be “sourpusses” but should reflect joy.

Washington Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl acknowledged that Catholics are not always

comfortable with the idea of evangelizing, but said they need to be willing to step out of themselves and talk with people about their faith as part of an encounter the pope speaks about.

Part of that simply involves listening to people, caring for them and leading them to Jesus, said speaker Sister Miriam James Heidland, a sister of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

Daphne Daly, director of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Office of Pastoral Planning, told the Catholic Review some "peripheries" can be obvious: immigrant communities, the poor or those suffering from racism.

"The peripheries also include folks who are hurting from substance abuse or addiction or people who feel marginalized because they are part of the deaf community or people who simply don't have a faith community that they call their home," she said. "There are geographic peripheries and spiritual peripheries. We're called to share the Gospel and the love of Christ with all of them."

Daly acknowledged that parishes and archdiocesan ministries are already reaching out on a daily basis.

"What we are being challenged to do now is find those peripheries that are not quite as visible to us," she said, "and address the ones that are right in front of us, but have not necessarily had a pastoral response."

John Romanowsky, executive director of evangelization for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, said he was encouraged that the archdiocese's pastoral planning process, "Be Missionary Disciples," is well aligned with the themes outlined at the convocation.

"It affirms what we are doing here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore," he said, adding that a national movement is emerging with missionary discipleship at its heart.

Members of the Baltimore delegation will be convening in the coming weeks, Romanowsky said, to discuss and implement what they learned in Orlando.

"We have a deep awareness that our local mission requires us to discover new ways

of being united even as we celebrate our diversity,” said Romanowsky, noting that archdiocesan delegates attended 50 break-out sessions at the convocation.

During the convocation, Archbishop Lori led a eucharistic procession through the streets of Orlando and celebrated the **July 3 closing Mass for the Fortnight for Freedom**, a two-week period of prayer, advocacy and education on religious freedom.

The archbishop said he was focused on the Blessed Sacrament during the eucharistic procession, but “could not help see the devotion of the people around me.”

“Many others told me they were very, very moved,” the archbishop said of the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. “It really helped us to focus the whole convocation on Christ.”

At the end of the July 4 convocation closing Mass, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, who attended all four days of the convocation, congratulated attendees for the invigorating discussion.

He called it a “kairos,” or opportune moment, in the life of the U.S. church and said he would tell Pope Francis: “the Spirit is alive in the church in the United States.”

“I will tell him of the commitment of many missionary disciples and their love for the church,” he added.

Catholic News Service contributed to this story.

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